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ABSTRACT

This lesson plan highlights one episode in the "Divine Comedy" to provide students with an introduction to Dante's poem. After a brief introduction to the opening of the "Divine Comedy," which portrays Dante as a pilgrim guided by the poet Virgil on a journey through the Christian afterlife toward God, students read Canto 5 of the "Inferno," which comes near the beginning of Dante's descent into Hell. Students refer to a diagram of Dante's underworld to understand the role of Minos at the start of this canto, then analyze Dante's description of the storm-tossed souls he encounters in order to gain further insight into his allegorical method. Next, students identify the famous lovers who set the stage for Paolo and Francesca and consider how they lend a literary dimension to readers' perception of this pair. Finally, students examine Francesca's "confession," comparing the philosophical style in which she first describes her love affair with the story-telling style she uses to describe what actually occurred. At the center of her story is the already-famous love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, and students consider how this story-within-a-story structure reflects on Francesca's own efforts to portray herself as a victim of courtly love. To conclude the lesson, students compare the effect that Lancelot's story had on Paolo and Francesca with the effect their story has on Dante in the poem, and the effect this layered episode has on Dante's readers today. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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A Storybook Romance: Dante's Paolo and Francesca

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Introduction

This lesson plan highlights one episode in the *Divine Comedy* to provide students with an introduction to Dante's great poem. After a brief introduction to the opening of the *Divine Comedy,* which portrays Dante as a pilgrim guided by the poet Virgil on a journey through the Christian afterlife toward God, students read Canto 5 of the *Inferno,* which comes near the beginning of Dante's descent into Hell. Students refer to a diagram of Dante's underworld to understand the role of Minos at the start of this canto, then analyze Dante's description of the storm-tossed souls he encounters in order to gain further insight into his allegorical method. Next, students identify the famous lovers who set the stage for Paolo and Francesca, and consider how they lend a literary dimension to our perception of this pair. Finally, students examine Francesca's "confession," comparing the philosophical style in which she first describes her love affair with the story-telling style she uses to describe what actually occurred. At the center of her story is the already-famous love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, and students consider how this story-within-a-story structure reflects on Francesca's own efforts to portray herself as a victim of courtly love. To conclude the lesson, students compare the effect that Lancelot's story had on Paolo and Francesca with the effect their story has on Dante in the poem, and the effect this layered episode has on Dante's readers today.

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about the structure and artistry of Dante's *Divine Comedy;* (2) To examine the episode of Paolo and Francesca as a poetic interpretation of romantic love; (3) To gain experience in close reading and interpretation of literary allusions.

Lesson Plan

Reading a single canto of the *Divine Comedy* might seem like plucking one tile from a vast mosaic, but any encounter with Dante, no matter how brief, can be stunning, so powerful was his imagination, so profound his mastery of his art. This lesson guides

Literature: World

Literature: Poetry

9-12

One to two class periods

- **reading literary texts**
- **critical analysis**
- **literary interpretation**
- **historical interpretation**
- **drawing inferences and comparisons**
- **critical thinking**
- **Internet skills**

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend,

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students in a close reading through one of the more accessible parts of Dante's great poem (perhaps especially accessible for teenagers), providing them with the interpretative skills to complete the journey on their own.

1 Begin by providing students with background on Dante and the Divine Comedy, referring to the "About Dante" section of the **Digital Dante** website on EDSITEment. (At the website's homepage, click on "About Dante" for a short biography; click on the dates "(1265-1321)" above the biography for a "Chronology" of Dante's life.)

- Explain to students that Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 in Florence, then a virtual city-state and perhaps the wealthiest mercantile center in the world. Dante began his career as a love poet, one of a group who developed a "new sweet style" *(dolce stil nuovo)* for the Tuscan language by following the example of the Provencal troubadours in poems on the mysteries and ecstasies of courtly love. By 1295, however, Dante had entered into a political career, rising to become one of the city's leaders, only to find himself banished from Florence under sentence of death in 1302 when a rival faction rose to power. The remainder of Dante's life was spent in exile, as an honored guest in various Italian courts and palaces. In this period he wrote important prose works on politics and the Italian language, and composed the *Divine Comedy,* publishing the first part, *Inferno,* in 1314. The remaining two parts of this work, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso,* were published after Dante's death in 1321.
- Emphasize for students that Dante played an important part in the acceptance of vernacular languages as a medium of serious thought and expression. His *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1304) was among the earliest studies of vernacular literature and rhetoric, and in the *Divine Comedy* he became one of the first writers to show that a vernacular language can rise to the lofty heights of epic, philosophy, and theology. In addition, with the *Divine Comedy* he made his own Tuscan dialect the basis for what would become modern Italian.

2 Introduce students to the *Divine Comedy* by having them read Canto 1 of *Inferno,* which stands as a prelude to the entire poem. (The *Divine Comedy* is made up of 100 cantos, 33 per section plus the introductory Canto 1.) The Italian text and two English translations of the *Divine Comedy* are available through EDSITEment at the **Digital Dante** website. One translation is by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; the other and more recent is by Allen Mandelbaum. Have students read 20 lines in each version; they will likely find Mandelbaum more appealing. Both translations are available in a format that sets the Italian and English verses side by side, so that students who read Italian (or any other Romance language) can check verbal details in the original. (At the **Digital Dante** homepage, click "Comedy," then select "Dante's *Comedy* with the Allen Mandelbaum translation." Use the scroll boxes in the lefthand frame to select "Canto 01" of Inferno, which will appear in the righthand frame. To print out this text, click in the righthand frame to select it before using the print function on your browser.)

interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
4. Individual Development and Identity (more)

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

1.2 Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics. (more)
2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
3.1 Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language. (more)
3.2 Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through foreign

- Have students summarize what happens in Canto 1. Dante says that, when he was midway through life's journey, he found himself lost in a dark forest where he wandered through the night, until daybreak brought him to the foot of a hill (lines 1-30). When he tried to climb, however, three beasts appeared -- a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf -- to chase him back (lines 31-60). Then he met the spirit of Virgil, the epic poet of imperial Rome, whom Dante regards as the model for his own poetry (lines 61-90). Virgil tells him that it is impossible to get past the she-wolf for now, although one day a hound will come to save Italy and drive her back to Hell (lines 91-111). Instead, Dante must take another path out of the dark forest, following Virgil through Hell and Purgatory, where he will meet another guide who can lead him on to Heaven (lines 112-129). And with this hope, Dante sets out on his way.
- Discuss with students the allegorical significance of this episode. What is symbolized by the dark forest in which Dante loses his way? What is symbolized by the sun-topped hill he attempts to climb? What do the three beasts represent? Guide students toward a broad interpretation of these allegorical elements, recognizing the beasts, for example, as manifestations of "animal passion," the sinful impulses that prevent one from ascending out of the wilderness of human life toward the realms of light. Students may be interested to learn that over the centuries scholars have assigned various specific meanings to the allegorical figures in Dante's poem, identifying the leopard as lust, the lion as pride, the she-wolf as avarice, Virgil as the spirit of classical learning or reason, and Beatrice as theology or revelation. (Beatrice is the Florentine woman whom Dante idolized in his love poetry and the guide to heaven whom Virgil alludes to at line 122.) But students should recognize that Dante's poem speaks in broad terms accessible to a general reader and does not require (although it does invite) detailed annotation.
- To reinforce this point, ask students to explain why Dante calls his poem a "comedy." Based on the outline of its plot that he gives in Canto 1, they will probably draw the conclusion that it is a comedy because it will end happily. And this is, in fact, the explanation that Dante gave for his title in a letter written in 1314 to the Veronese nobleman, Cangrande della Scala. (The full text of this letter is available through EDSITEment at the **Digital Dante** website; click on "Dante's Works" under the heading "In the Library" on the website's homepage, then click "Letter to Can Grande.") He writes:

  The title of the work is, "Here beginneth the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, not by character." To understand which, be it know that comedy . . . is a certain kind of poetic narration differing . . . from tragedy in its content, in that tragedy begins admirably and tranquilly, whereas its end or exit is foul and terrible; . . . whereas comedy introduces some harsh complication, but brings its matter to a prosperous end . . . They likewise differ in their mode of speech, tragedy being exalted and sublime, comedy lax and humble . . . And hence it is evident that the title of the present work is "the Comedy." For if we have respect to its contents, at the beginning it is horrible and fetid, for it is hell; and in the end it is prosperous, desirable, and gracious, for it is Paradise. If we have respect to the method of speech, the method is lax and humble, for it is the vernacular speech in which very women

language and its cultures. (more)

4.1 Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own. (more)

4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own. (more)

View your state's standards

communicate.

- Conclude this review of Canto 1 by focusing on the metaphor of journey that Dante establishes for his poem in this episode. Help students recognize that to some extent Dante presents himself here as an Everyman figure pacing through the journey of "our life" (line 1), charting the spiritual path from earthly life to salvation. At the same time, however, Dante claims this journey as a personal experience (see Canto 2, lines 7-9, where he invokes memory as his muse), and presents himself as a character who lived through an amazing adventure. It is in this double sense that critics often describe Dante as a pilgrim within the poem, a traveler in quest of spiritual peace and fulfillment. As poet, the maker of this vast artwork, Dante presents an allegory of medieval philosophy, theology, and science in the way he structures each realm of the afterlife, and a vivid chronicle of medieval society and politics in his portraits of the souls he meets there. Yet it is the story of the pilgrim that gives the *Divine Comedy* its vitality, and students should focus on his adventures as they make their way into the poem.

3 Have students next read Canto 5 of *Inferno,* which recounts Dante's adventures among those whose passion condemned them to hell. Focus discussion first on Dante's encounter with Minos (lines 1-24), providing students with a diagram of Hell so that they can see where this encounter takes place. (Click "Maps" on the **Digital Dante** homepage, then select "Inferno: Conceptual, by Barry Moser" for a detailed diagram.)

- Point out to students that Hell is organized as a series of concentric circles imagined as terraces along the walls of a vast abyss. Dante and Virgil journey through Hell by descending from one circle to the next, advancing deeper into sin at every level.
- As Canto 5 begins, Dante has already ventured through the gates of Hell (where he read the famous inscription, "Abandon every hope who enter here" [Canto 3, line 9]) and has passed through the first circle, called Limbo, which is the final resting place of noble pagans and Old Testament heroes who are damned because they were not baptized. He now descends into the second circle, where he will first encounter souls who brought damnation on themselves by their sins. In some respects, then, Canto 5 marks a new beginning in his journey, the start of his tour through all the varieties of sin.
- Have students explain the role Minos plays here. The diagram should help them recognize that he assigns each sinner to his or her proper place in Hell, signaling the circle each is destined for by the number of times he wraps his tail around himself. Why does Minos challenge Dante as soon as he sees him? What does he warn him against? Is it likely that Dante will "trust" anyone in Hell (line 19; note that the word in Italian is *fide,* which connotes faith)? Looking ahead, could one say that he puts his trust in Francesca by the end of this canto?

4 Turn next to Dante's description of this circle of Hell (lines 25-45), focusing on the landscape he sets before our eyes and the physical impression he creates through his use of simile and comparison.

- What changes does the pilgrim notice as soon as he passes through the entrance guarded by Minos? Is it significant that

sight and hearing seem impossible in this place? In what respect is it fitting that these senses are denied to those who sinned against reason (lines 38-39)?

- What is the poetic significance of the hurricane that howls through this circle, driving the sinners along like wind-swept starlings (lines 40-45)? Throughout the Inferno, Dante portrays the damned suffering a punishment that befits, and to some degree illustrates, their sin. In other words, they are condemned to live out their sin for eternity. How does the driving wind here befit those guilty of giving in to passion? What powers this wind -- the wrath of God or the force of their own desires?

5 Call attention next to the parade of famous lovers (lines 52-67) and the pilgrim's reaction to them (lines 70-72). Why does he call them "knights" and "ladies," terms that identify them as characters of medieval romance? Inform students that, during the middle ages, storytellers often did transform the legends of ancient Greece and Rome into familiar tales of noble knights and gentle ladies. But in Dante's poem, Virgil does not describe these famous lovers in those terms. It is the pilgrim who sees them not as historical figures -- and they must be historical if they are in Hell -- but as storybook characters, the heroes and heroines of romance. Looking ahead to the effect that romance has on Paolo and Francesca, have students explain how the pilgrim's misperception of these sinners might be linked to the uncontrollable pity he suddenly feels. Why does he say that this feeling of pity made him "like a man astray"? Is his sympathetic reaction misguided? a letting down of his guard such as Minos warned against? What does this feeling lead to?

6 The remaining lines of Canto 5 tell the story of Paolo and Francesca, one of the most admired episodes in the poem. Ask students their opinion of Francesca. Is she a victim of circumstances as she seems to suggest? a victim of love's irresistible power? a tragic victim, damned by her own loving nature? Have students look closely at the way Dante characterizes Francesca through her double telling of her story.

- Look first at Francesca's greeting to the pilgrim (lines 88-96). Ask students to visualize the situation as Francesca speaks these lines. She has made her way through a whirlwind to speak with Dante in a place where speech is ordinarily overwhelmed by noise. Yet her first words seem to characterize this encounter as a social occasion. The pilgrim, she supposes, has "come to visit" them. And like a courteous hostess, Francesca begins the visit by complimenting her guest (line 88), speaking candidly of herself (lines 90-93), and declaring herself ready to talk about anything the pilgrim would like (lines 94-96). How do these details of Francesca's way of speaking affect one's response to her character? Does she win our affection with these social graces? Does she reveal herself as skilled in the arts of winning affection?
- Francesca first tells her story in the philosophical language of courtly love. Inform students that her opening line here, "Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart" (line 100), echoes the opening line of the poem that paved the way for the "new sweet style" that Dante adopted in his youth. For a reader of Dante's time, this allusion would probably mark Francesca as a woman caught up in the cult of courtly love, which developed in late 12th-century France in connection with chivalric romance and continued to influence the literature of love through the 19th century. In general,

"courtly love" refers to a belief that love is an ennobling passion. In medieval times, the concept distinguished love among nobles from the baser affections felt by common men and women, and became elaborated into an etiquette of courtship called "courtesy." Courtly love led the noble lover to a higher spiritual plane through acts of devotion to his lady -- for example, wearing her ensignia into battle, writing a poem expressing his unworthiness of her favor, or attending on her dutifully at court. As Francesca indicates, those with a "gentle heart" -- that is, the gentry -- were supposed to be especially susceptible to this passion, and thus feeling this emotion could be considered a "proof" of one's spiritual worth. In addition, courtly love tested one's worth by placing obstacles in the way of love's fulfillment. According to its code, a true lover would remain devoted despite such frustrations, and refine his or her nobility by demonstrating that devotion in word and deed. (For additional background on courtly love, see the essay by Larry D. Benson, "Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages," available through EDSITEment at the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website**. Click on "Site Index" in the navigation bar at the left of this website's homepage, then scroll down to and click on "Courtly Love" in the list of "Texts and General Subjects." Among the many resources on this topic, select the link to "Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages" for the text of Benson's essay.)

- Ask students how readers uninformed about courtly love might still recognize Francesca as a woman deeply influenced by romantic love. Call attention, for example, to the repetition of the word "love" at the start of these three stanzas (lines 100-108). Note also the cause and effect explanation she gives for this love affair, which suggests that human emotions operate with a kind of instinctive inevitability -- what we sometimes call "chemistry." Have students paraphrase Francesca's explanation. Why did Paolo fall in love with her? Why did she fall in love with him? Why did their love lead to death? Who is responsible for the sin that has put them in Hell? (Students may wonder who Francesca wishes to the lowest circle of Hell in line 107; it is her husband, who discovered Paolo and Francesca's love affair and murdered them both.)
- Have students compare Francesca's style in the second part of her confession with the courtly love language she used at first. Can they hear an echo of the storyteller's traditional "Once upon a time . . ." in Francesca's "One day . . ." (line 127)? Note the other elements of story here: setting, plot, characterization, denouement. Yet her story is not told in the high style of courtly romance, the style, presumably, of the Lancelot story she and Paolo read. It is, instead, a kind of home-made romance, a reflection of the fictional ideal in the mundane terms of everyday life. Have students note the parallels in her description of this love affair's climactic moment: Lancelot, the true lover (line 134) turns into Paolo, the trembling lover (line 136); Guinevere's alluring smile (line 133) turns into Francesca's plain mouth (line 136); even the courtly go-between, Gallehaut, turns into something more mundane, a book by an anonymous author (lines 137-38). Does Francesca perceive these differences between her real-life story and the fictional ideal? Or does she see her love affair with Paolo as a tragic storybook romance? In her view, who is responsible for their "subjecting reason to desire" (line 39)?

7 Look finally at the pilgrim's reaction to Francesca's confession. What is the relationship between the pity he feels here and the pity he felt for the famous knights and ladies of love?

- In that earlier moment, pity made him disoriented, "like a man astray" (line 72). Here pity overwhelms him, renders him unconscious, and his body falls "dead" (lines 141-42). Is Francesca's story more potent than the stories of those famous lovers? Does it stir a deeper emotion because it is tragically real? Have students debate whether Dante comes close to sharing in Francesca's sin here, by subjecting his reason to desire. They should recognize that being overcome with emotion like Dante is different from acting on one's emotions like Paolo and Francesca. Yet they may also conclude that the pilgrim's death-like response to Francesca's story shows how contagious this sin can be, how it can breed even in positive emotions like pity and compassion.
- Dante's reaction to Francesca's story also bears some relationship to her and Paolo's reaction to the story of Lancelot. They were drawn by that story to act on their love for one another. Dante is drawn by her story toward acting on the affection he feels for these two damned souls. Explore with students their reaction to this multi-leveled love story. Were they drawn toward Francesca? Did she win their pity and love? Or did they see her as a self-deluded sinner using courtesy, courtly love, and the conventions of romance to justify her actions?

8 Conclude this lesson in close reading by having students explore some of the questions raised by your study of Canto 5 in an essay analyzing Francesca's character, both as perceived by Dante the Pilgrim and as perceived by readers of Dante's poem.

Extending the Lesson

Useful background to Dante's portrayal of Paolo and Francesca is available through EDSITEment at the **Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies** website. Students can test their own susceptibility to the kind of story that Francesca found irresistible at "**The Charrette Project**," a website devoted to the Lancelot story, "Le Chevalier de la Charrette," by the 12th-century French poet Chretien de Troyes. (At the **Labyrinth** homepage, click on "French" under the "Auctores et fontes" heading, and select "The Charrette Project.") Storytelling closer to Francesca's own experiences with love can be sampled at "**The Decameron Web**," a site devoted to Boccaccio and the development of the novella. (At the **Labyrinth** webpage, click on "Italy" under the "National Cultures" heading, and select "**The Decameron Web**.") Finally, for additional background on courtly love, students can read the essay "The Enduring Popularity of Courtly Love," by Kay Stoner, at the "**Women Writers of the Middle Ages**" website, which includes much additional material on the life of women in medieval times. (At the **Labyrinth** homepage, click "Medieval Women" under the heading "Special Topics," then select "Medieval Women" for a link to "Women Writers in the Middle Ages," and scroll down to "The Enduring Popularity of Courtly Love.")